

SCHOOLS, JEWISH AND OTHER: A CONFLICT?

What Is the Problem?

The Jewish community is officially committed to 1) the support of private Jewish day schools; 2) the support of public schools.

That double commitment will continue to be in tension, reflecting the full set of Jewish aspirations: 1) a flourishing Jewish life in America, built on a committed and Jewish-educated Jewry; 2) an American society in which those Jewish institutions *can* flourish, and in which committed and educated Jews *can* live without disability.

The tension lies in the fact that the common public school has apparently played a crucial role in creating an American society in which Jewish institutions and committed Jewish individuals can so live and flourish.

The common public schools were once important in providing economic mobility for the children of Jewish immigrants. They were, in the words of an early Jewish immigrant, Mary Antin, "the essence of American opportunity." But the schools were not just free; they were open, common schools. The Jews may not need the public schools for economic mobility anymore -- but are we sure that we don't need them to maintain the process of Jewish integration into the American society? There may be in store a process of group fragmentation which would change the status of our grandchildren in the American society -- and inhibit them from living as committed Jews.

However, there is a reason for Jews to support the public schools, even if no Jewish children attend those schools. One fact emerges paramount in the study of anti-semitism: the higher the education among Americans, the lower the anti-semitism. Obviously this is not true for any given individual but it is strikingly true statistically. One nationwide survey by the University of California was typical: 51 per cent of those who had only graduated from the 8th grade, ranked high on anti-semitic attitudes; as against 32 per

cent of those who graduated from high school, and 16 per cent who graduated from college. That is symptomatic of the fact that American public school education is one of the foundations on which we can build a society in which Jews are free to pursue their Judaism.

Thus, the dilemma is not so great. For reasons indicated above, the Jewish community has a need to support the public schools, even if all the Jewish children go to Jewish day schools. Furthermore, in actual fact, we are not even close to the point where most Jewish parents want to send their children to other than public schools.

A recent survey among Jews in San Francisco, Marin and the Peninsula indicated that about 4 out of 5 Jewish parents prefer their children to go to public school. Asked for the reason, about two thirds of them had to do with the desire for their children to have an integrated experience, or simply the desire to support the public school system.

Most of the parents who send their children to public school want their children to have "a better Jewish education," but they want to do this by means other than a Jewish day school, e.g.: afternoon schools, Jewish youth groups, synagogue experiences, Jewish camp experiences, Israel experiences.

At the same time, an increasing number of children *are* attending Jewish day schools, especially in the San Francisco area. It is important for Jewish continuity that there be a core of more intensely educated Jews. Current research at Hebrew University suggests that there was never a mass level of Jewish scholarship among Jews, but that an important minority always carried this crucial mission.

As for imparting "Jewishness," short of such scholarship, in a recent survey of Jewish education, David Resnick of the Jewish Theological Seminary wrote that "most investigators have found that personal Jewishness is more influenced by the home than by the schools." And the overwhelming educational wisdom of this century is that full-time

and part-time educational institutions -- Jewish or otherwise -- are successful only to the extent that they start with children who have already been motivated by family or community. The schools, themselves, do not typically provide the motivation, but opportunity for the motivated.

However, this still poses the responsibility for the Jewish community to support the educational programs and institutions which are variously required by Jewish parents and children -- and to stimulate Jewish educational motivation across the board.

What Is Needed

While continuing to support the public schools, the Jewish community must continually intensify the drive for Jewish education ... assist in the increasing demand for all-day Jewish schools ... help provide the alternative Jewish education for those who want to attend public schools ... and help provide the general cultural tone in the community which will most create Jewish motivation. There is in sight no serious conflict between the Jewish commitment to public schools and Jewish education.